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BIOGRAPHY OF HENRY URBAN - ARCHITECT
1848 - 1927

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submitted to Dr. Roger Warlick
History 300
Armstrong State College
2 March 1982

Scanned 2011 from The Savannah Biographies Volume 10

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Armed with only an index card and a pencil, and starting from a state of total ignorance, I began my monumentous task two months ago. In retrospect, I can see to whom I owe more than just thanks. My heart felt gratitude goes to Mrs. Elfrida Theus, because she put "life" onto the blank white pages which follow. Mrs. Theus who turns 87 this month, was as kind and thoughtful as could be. Her memory was clear and as vivid as if it happened only yesterday. So, to Mrs. Theus, I say thank you, and Happy Birthday.

ABSTRACT

Henry C. Urban was born on December 27, 1848, in Frankfurt, Germany. He attended the Berlin School of Art, where he studied architecture. After one year of mandatory service in the German Army, he went to Paris, where he build several public buildings. There he met William Preston, of Boston, who asked Urban to work for his agency. He agreed, and came to the United States in 1883. He came to Savannah in December of 1888 (on his honeymoon) to supervise the construction of the De Soto Hotel. After that, he built the recently destroyed Independent Presbyterian Church. Deciding to stay in Savannah, he became a noted architect, building for the city as well as private citizens. He had two daughters (Elfrida and Doris), and lived fairly well. He retired in 1915, partly due to the anti-German sentiment of World War I. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage on September 20, 1927, at the age of 78. He is buried at Laurel Grove Cemetary, Lot No. 38.

Henry C. Urban was born in Frankfort, Germany on December 27, 1848.¹ The names of his parents are unknown,² yet it was disclosed that they were both from Germany.³

Few records exist of Urban's early life in Germany. He went to college at the Berlin School of Art,⁴ where he studied architecture.⁵ After graduation, he served one year in the German National Army during the Franco-Prussian War.⁶ After his service was completed, he moved to Paris, where he built several public buildings.⁷ It was in Paris where Urban met William Preston, head of the William Preston Agency located in Boston.⁸ Mr. Preston was so impressed by Urban's work that he asked Urban to return to the United States with him, and work for his company.⁹ Urban accepted, and in 1883, he came to the United States to live.¹⁰

During his residence in Boston, he courted Ella Willis,¹¹ daughter of R. B. Willis, a local cabinet maker.¹² Urban was not the only member of his family to come to the United States: soon after, his three brothers and three sisters came from Germany to live in the Boston area.¹³ In 1888, Urban received an appointment to supervise the building of the De Soto Hotel in Savannah, Georgia.¹⁴ So, on December 24, 1888, Henry Urban married Ella Willis, and came by ship to Savannah on their honeymoon.¹⁵ On December 31, 1888, construction was begun on the De Soto Hotel.¹⁶

Urban and his wife moved into an apartment at 163 Liberty Street.¹⁷ On April 7, 1889, the Great Hogan Fire destroyed many buildings in the downtown area.¹⁸ In an interview with Elfrida Theus, Urban's daughter, the following story was related:

That night, Urban awoke to the sound of the firemen rushing to the scene, and was in fear that his hotel, not yet completed, was burning down. It was the next morning when he discovered the fire did not extend to the De Soto building site.¹⁹ The building's opening was on December 31, 1889, exactly one year after it's construction was begun.²⁰

Instead of returning to Boston, Urban received another assignment from the William Preston Agency²¹ - to reconstruct Independent Presbyterian Church, which had burned down in the 1889 blaze.²² The design was made personally by William Preston, using material from the Boston Public Library, local pictures and descriptions offered by citizens of the community.²³ During the rebuilding of the sanctuary, Urban and his wife grew to like the city so much, they decided to stay.²⁴

The Urbans moved into a house at 33 Taylor Street²⁵ (after 1896, the address was changed to 419 E. Taylor Street²⁶). On May 22, 1892, the foundation was laid for the Provident Building, of which Urban was the architect.²⁷ He then moved his office into Room 23 of this building.²⁸

February 1, 1893, marked the opening of Beth Eden Baptist Church, which Urban designed.²⁹ This was the first of three prominent buildings built especially for the Negro: also constructed were Bethel Lee Church on Lincoln and Gordon,³⁰ and a School For Negro Children, which was opened on June 3, 1911.³¹

In 1890, the Little Sisters of the Poor, an international organization with a pledge to care for the aged poor, came to Savannah.³² Soon after their arrival, they found that they needed a larger building to meet their obligation to the aged

poor. Henry Urban was hired to build the new home for the organization.³³ Construction was started on December 8, 1893, and the cornerstone was laid on February 18, 1894.³⁴ Urban used over 4,000,000 Savannah Gray Bricks to construct the building.³⁵

Urban was then called upon to build a new wing at the Bethesda Home for Boys.³⁶ His daughter recollects Urban telling her stories of when he and his wife would ride out to Bethesda on his horse and buggy, during the construction, and bring candy and treats for the orphans.³⁷ The new wing was opened on October 6, 1894.³⁸

During this time, the Urbans had two children: Elfrida, born in March of 1896, and Doris, born in December of 1897.³⁹ Elfrida holds many fond memories of the Urban home. During an interview, she reflected that Urban was an accomplished piano player, and a great opera fan. He brought many German traditions into the home, one of which was the Christmas celebration. While the children waited upstairs on Christmas Eve, Ella and Henry would decorate the Christmas Tree. When they were finished, Urban would play the Tanhouser March on the piano, and the children would come down the stairs in time with the music. They would then open their presents.⁴⁰

Urban did not only build public buildings: he also built several private homes, such as the W. W. Osborne Home,⁴¹ the Kayton Home⁴², the Baldwin Home⁴³, and Captain Walker's Home, which was completed on September 2, 1897.⁴⁴

During his years as an architect, Urban became well known in the city. He was very good friends with the noted historian

Thomas Gamble.⁴⁵ Urban was also asked to build the Lawton Memorial at Bonaventure Cemetery.⁴⁶ This public building was in memorium to Alexander Lawton, a Confederate Army brigadier general, who shared the responsibility of guarding Savannah and the vicinity.⁴⁷ The building was opened on March 2, 1899.⁴⁸

After Chatham Academy burned down in 1899, Henry Urban submitted a plan to rebuild it.⁴⁹ It was accepted, and the school was dedicated in 1908.⁵⁰ Urban gained additional fame by building St. Joseph's Hospital located on Lincoln and Taylor Streets.⁵¹ Its use of cross ventilation made it a revolutionary new design in hospital construction.⁵² Dr. Hesse, the Urban family doctor, remarked that it was the first sensible hospital in the city.⁵³

During the many years he spent in Savannah, Urban also built a Library at Wormsloe Plantation,⁵⁴ St. Benedict School and Rectory on Gordon and East Broad,⁵⁵ the Sacred Heart Church Rectory on Bull Street,⁵⁶ and the Exchange Bank on Broughton Street.⁵⁷

Henry Urban retired in 1915, partially due to the anti-German sentiment during the First World War.⁵⁸ He was unjustly stereotyped⁵⁹ because he never became a citizen of the United States.⁶⁰ During this time, because of the Liberty boats loading in the harbor, Urban was not allowed to cross the Savannah River.⁶¹

Soon after he retired, his children got married. Doris married Grover Childers in 1916, and Elfrida married Charles Theus in the fall of 1918.⁶² Urban spent most of his retirement writing, drawing for his children, and playing the piano.⁶³

On September 18, 1927, Urban went into St. Joseph's Hospital under the care of Dr. Hesse. September 19 was the last time he was seen alive.⁶⁵ He was discovered dead in his room on the morning of September 20, 1927, the victim of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 78.⁶⁶ His funeral was held at 627 East 40th Street, the home of Charles and Elfrida Theus, with Rev. C. A. Limn, of the Lutheran Church of the Ascension officiating.⁶⁷ He was buried at Laurel Grove Cemetery, Lot #38. Since Urban did not leave a will, his estate was divided among his wife and children.⁶⁸

END NOTES

1 "Henry Urban Died Tuesday," Savannah Morning News, 21 Sept. 1927, p. 6, col. 4.

2 The only records that were available were the Census records and the Death Certificate, neither of which gave the parents names. Urban's daughter, Elfrida Theus, could not recall, either.

3 Chatham County Census, 1900, p. 2871, sheet 10, Supervisor 31, Enumeration 11, available at Georgia Historical Society, Microfilm.

4 "Urban Died," p. 6.

5 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, daughter of Henry Urban, Savannah, Georgia, 20 Jan. and 23 Feb. 1982. (See Notes of Interest #1)

6 Ibid. (see Notes of Interest #2)

7 Ibid..

8 Ibid..

9 Ibid..

10 Chatham County Census, 1900, p. 2871, sheet 10.

11 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.

12 Letter from Florence Connolly, Corlator of Fine Arts, Boston Public Library, to Mary Morrison, 17 Feb. 1977.

13 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.

14 Ibid..

15 Ibid..

16 Ibid..

17 Savannah City Directory, 1889, p. 393, available at Savannah Public Library.

Note - Courthouse Records were checked (Grantees and Grantors Index for the time period, and the Ground Rent Index), but there are no records of Henry Urban owning or renting property, although he did (according to the 1900 Census of Chatham County).

18 "A Whirlwind of Fire," Savannah Morning News, 7 April 1889, p. 1, col. 1.

19 Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.

20 Ibid..

- 21 Ibid., 23 Feb. 1982.
- 22 "Fire," p. 1, col. 4.
- 23 Independent Presbyterian Church, Independent Presbyterian Church (of) Savannah, available at I.P.C., p. 3.
- 24 Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.
- 25 Savannah City Directory, 1890, p. 422, available at Savannah Public Library.
- 26 Ibid., 1894, p. 494.
- 27 "New Buildings Going Up," Savannah Morning News, 22 May 1892, p. 8, col. 2.
- 28 Savannah City Directory, 1894, p. 494.
- 29 "Beth Eden's New Church," Savannah Morning News, 1 Feb. 1893, p. 8, col. 4.
- 30 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.
- 31 "School For Negro Children," Savannah Morning News, 3 June 1911, Architect file, available at the Georgia Historical Society.
- 32 Skip Maloney, Lazy Susan Restaurant, available at the restaurant, p. 1.
- 33 Ibid., p. 2.
- 34 Ibid., p. 2.
- 35 Ibid., p. 2.
- 36 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.
- 37 Ibid.. (See Notes of Interest #3)
- 38 "New Wing For Bethesda," Savannah Morning News, 6 Oct. 1894, p. 8, col. 12.
- 39 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 23 Feb. 1982.
- 40 Ibid..
- 41 Ibid., 20 Jan. 1982.
- 42 Ibid..
- 43 Ibid..
- 44 "New Home Completed", Savannah Morning News, 2 Sept. 1897, p. 8, col. 3.
- 45 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982. (See Notes of Interest #4)

- 46 Ibid..
- 47 Robert Meyers, ed. The Children of Pride, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 1591-92.
- 48 Ibid., p. 1592.
- 49 Georgia Historical Society, Miscellaneous Catalog 100-199, Manuscript File #134.
- 50 Ibid..
- 51 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.
- 52 Ibid..
- 53 Ibid..
- 54 Ibid..
- 55 Ibid., 20 Feb. 1982.
- 56 Ibid..
- 57 Ibid..
- 58 Ibid..
- 59 Ibid..
- 60 Chatham County Census, 19W, p. 2871, sheet 10.
- 61 Personal Interview with Elfrida Theus, 20 Jan. 1982.
- 62 Ibid., 23 Feb. 1982. (See Notes of Interest #5)
- 63 Ibid., 20 Jan. 1982.
- 64 Death Certificate #1258, available at Chatham County Health Center, Vital Records Department.
- 65 Ibid. (See Notes of Interest #6)
- 66 Ibid..
- 67 "Urban Died," p. 6. (See Notes of Interest #7)
- 68 Laurel Grove Cemetery Records, Vol. 3, WPA official project #465-34-3-148 (1939), available at Georgia Historical Society.
- 69 No record of a will was found in the Chatham County Probate Court records room.

NOTES OF INTEREST

1. During the January 20 interview, Mrs. Theus mentioned that while Urban was in college, he roomed with a German composer by the name of Schuman, who composed the work Tromari. Urban used to tell the story that he would be awakened in the middle of the night by Schuman, who would jump out of bed and begin playing his violin, saying that compositions came to him in his sleep.
2. In Urban's bataillon, he was soldier #13. During a battle, soldiers #12 and #14 were killed, but Urban survived.
3. When Ella and Henry Urban would ride up to Bethesda, the children would shout, "Here comes the candy man!"
4. Thomas Gamble (1868 - 1945) was also known as Mayor of Savannah from 1934 to 1945, serving six consecutive terms.
5. Doris Childers died just last year (1981) in San Diego, California. Mrs. Theus (a widow) now resides at the Chatham Nursing Home in Savannah.
6. The last person to see Henry Urban alive was Fred Wahl, a longtime friend and sculptist. His work can be seen on the Board of Public Education Building, and the Lawton Memorial.
7. The records were checked at Lutheran Church of the Ascension, and Henry Urban's name did not appear. Although he attended this church, Elfrida said that he may not have become a member because of the irregularity of his attendance.

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- Vital Records Department, Chatham County Health Board. Death Certificate #1258.
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